

Mayor Carlos Alvarez
State of the County – 2006 Address
Miami-Dade County Auditorium, 2901 West Flagler Street
February 28, 2006, 10:00AM

OPENING

Thank you, Dr. Greer for that kind introduction. I also want to thank all of those involved in today's program – the Southwood Middle School jazz ensemble... Ernst Pierre who gave us a stirring rendition of our National Anthem... the Miami-Dade Combined Honor guard... Miami-Dade Police Department Explorers... Commissioner Gimenez... my good friend, Bishop Isaiah Williams, and His Excellency Archbishop John Favalora. I am humbled by your presence and participation.

Chairman Joe Martinez... Members of the Board of County Commissioners.... County Attorney Greenberg... Fellow Elected Officials... members of our Consular Corps... Mr. Manager... Fellow County Employees... and Miami-Dade County residents... welcome to the 2006 State of the County Address.

We are in a place rich with history and drama. Over the past 55 years this auditorium has hosted dozens of entertainers and political figures. Luciano Pavarotti made his American stage debut here. Singer Marian Anderson – who helped break the color barrier – sang here before an integrated audience. Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford and Reagan held rallies here. And every Mayor that has served Miami-Dade County since the 1950's has spoken here.

I do not seek to fill the shoes of those who came before me. Instead... I stand here on my own merits... with my own record... and a promise to continue to give you my personal best.

My first year in office has been one filled with progress.... promises kept... and new priorities.

PROGRESS

Hurricanes & 311

Two-thousand-five will be remembered as the year of Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma. We lived through them, learned from them, and will be better prepared for whatever next season will bring.

So many county employees worked tirelessly, sacrificing their personal lives and property, in order to provide assistance to others. Thank you.

Of special note – our firefighters who braved the devastation in the Gulf States to save lives and comfort those less fortunate than ourselves. Let's recognize them and their leader, Fire Chief Herminio Lorenzo.

Closer to home, our 3-1-1 Answer Center Specialists hunkered down at the Emergency Operations Center and worked around-the-clock. They answered more than a million calls this year... and relayed accurate and up-to-date information.

Staying motivated and customer-friendly is not easy when the phone never stops ringing! But they are doing it! Let's recognize 3-1-1 and its Call Center Manager, Becky Jo Glover, for a fine first year – during times of crisis and calm.

GOB & Parks

Like 3-1-1, our “Building Better Communities Bond Program” is also off to a good start. Ground broke for new sidewalks in West Perrine in November and since that time, even more projects have begun. Hundreds more are on the way.

Much of the General Obligation Bond money is dedicated to our parks system. If you have ever been to Metrozoo... attended a wedding at the Deering Estate... or rolled down the hill at Greynolds Park... then you have experienced Miami-Dade County's Park System. We are putting together an open-space master plan to guide park development for the next 50 years. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to partner with our cities... state and national governments to create a seamless system of parkways, boulevards, greenways and blueways.

Great cities – like New York, Paris and London – are distinguished by their open spaces, park systems and areas which are forever dedicated to the people.

We must never lose sight of our commitment to provide attractive, recreational and tranquil places which counter the ever-increasing hustle-bustle of our daily lives.

Whether it is enhancements to our parks system or sidewalks in Perrine... we must stay on course and ensure we continue to wisely spend the bond money taxpayers have entrusted to us.

Airport

For a long time... trust seemed lost at Miami International Airport... but that is changing. M-I-A is poised to welcome new carriers with the scheduled completion of the South Terminal this fall.

New and improved retail and food concessions are being planned, designed and put out for bid. This process is being handled professionally, fairly and transparently.

Our airport director – Jose Abreu – is meticulously overseeing every detail of the North Terminal construction project to make sure it is done right.

All of the improvements will transform the look, the feel, and the overall operations of M-I-A.

We must remember, our airport is the first place visitors see when they arrive and their last experience before they depart. I can assure you that the new M-I-A will bolster their opinion of us.

The transformation will not happen overnight, but for the first time in a long time, the clouds have cleared and we can see our destination.

Seaport

Our seaport is also undergoing massive capital improvements... and with that comes growing pains. We are making room for more cruise and cargo traffic, and updating equipment to make us more competitive.

It is an industry that seems to know no bounds. We must keep pace by providing infrastructure and facilities that exceed those of our competitors.

This growth – as well as increased security – is causing delays. But, we must press on. We must find efficiencies that do not compromise safety – or be willing to relinquish our title as the Cruise Capital of the World and a leader in the import and export of goods.

Procurement

Whether it is goods – or services – we're acquiring, our county is making great strides in the area of procurement. More procurement authority has been delegated to the County Manager and procurement director. The result is a better, faster process.

More than three dozen additional reforms have been proposed that promise to streamline the process even further – and cut approval times by 30%. The reforms are laid out in intricate detail. This roadmap – combined with our procurement department's proven track record – should instill confidence in our elected officials and position our county staff to assume even more procurement responsibility.

The proposed reforms are not change for change's sake. They are about regaining the confidence of our business partners, the government community and our citizenry.

I am also confident that our department directors will embrace these reforms. They understand that the welfare of our community depends not only on the goods and services we provide, but the way in which we provide them.

Transportation

We are providing immediate traffic solutions. A new leader – Esther Calas – is at the helm of our Public Works Department. And together with our transit department we are improving transportation. Our traffic woes are the result of unprecedented development... and underscore the importance of planned growth.

More than 65 intersections are undergoing short-term traffic fixes. These intersection improvements will reduce delays up to 30% in some areas.

In addition... signal timing is being coordinated along 10 traffic corridors. The expected improvement – another 5% in reduced delays.

And, we are updating an outdated traffic control system to better detect problems and control all traffic signals. Expected improvement – another 5%.

Because of the People's Transportation Plan we are high on the priority list to receive federal funding to expand our Metrorail system. Design work on the East-West and North-South corridors is proceeding and we have state funding commitments.

The same is true for the Earlington Heights – Miami Intermodal Center connector. When finished, it will be possible to go from Downtown Miami to Miami International Airport without ever needing an automobile.

Not one of these traffic remedies will solve our traffic problems entirely... but together, motorists will soon see a measured difference.

PAC

What a difference a year has made in the progress of the Miami Performing Arts Center. Construction is now 95% complete... and the PAC is scheduled to open in August.

For those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to view this magnificent facility, you are in for a real treat. It truly is an architectural wonder, with breathtaking views from all angles. Painstaking detail has been put into every wall, window, seat, and fixture.

You will be struck by the elegance, versatility, and acoustical superiority of what will surely be the jewel in the crown of our artistic and entertainment endeavors.

The PAC proves public-private partnerships can work. For those of you who love great dance and theater... it will be the place to be. For those of you who avoid the arts... I offer an invitation of a different kind. Join me next year as I deliver my State of the County address from the Miami Performing Arts Center. It's not Shakespeare... but we are going to continue to shake things up!

Public Safety

Our police department is working to shake things up and keep criminals guessing. For nearly a decade, the crime rate has continued to decline. Police officers are working harder and smarter than ever before.

The statistics tell the story. While Miami-Dade County has grown by more than a 100,000 people in the past 5 years, only 37 officers have joined the ranks in the last 10 years.

There is no doubt. We are doing more with less. This decade of progress must continue.

Police Director Bobby Parker has unveiled an aggressive plan designed to further reduce criminal activity. It includes increased truancy and warrant sweeps, robbery intervention, probation and parole checks, as well as an emphasis on education.

This 12-month initiative could be implemented in less than a month, but it will require more resources. I am asking our commission to appropriate the necessary funding through a budget amendment.

If these strategies are effective – as I am sure they will be – the investment will pay dividends in the safety and security of our residents and visitors.

Tourists & Business

Our low crime rate is one reason why people all over the world seek Miami-Dade County out for business and pleasure. For the first time in history, our summer season is rivaling our winter season in terms of tourists. When you think about it, that truly is incredible! Forty years ago, when both of my parents worked in the service industry, the winter season was the only season! No more. We are now a year-round destination!

In 2005, Miami-Dade County was one of the top five communities in the country for occupancy and room rates. More than 11 million visitors made Miami-Dade their destination of choice... setting a record – and signaling that tourism has recovered from the shock of 9-11.

Like our tourists, the business community is also lured by our amenities. Companies like Burger King and Ryder Systems have made Miami-Dade County not only a place to visit, they have made it their corporate home. We appreciate their continued support... and encourage other international businesses to discover all we have to offer.

PROMISES KEPT

Permitting

Two-thousand-five has been more than just a year of progress. It has also been a year of promises kept... including my first promise – to revamp the permitting process.

Customer-friendly is the new mantra for all departments involved in permitting and plan review.

Whether you are a homeowner putting an addition on your house... a business owner seeking to open a warehouse... or a developer looking to build... you can expect a new level of communication... coordination and cooperation from Miami-Dade County and its employees.

After a year of hard work... input from community, industry and county leaders... we have a comprehensive plan – with timelines – that is being implemented.

You know... permitting is not a subject that makes headlines or leads the six o'clock news, but it is a critical area that touches so many of us.

Under our new system, plans won't be scrapped because of minor flaws. All departments involved in plan review will be accessible. And, greeters at our permitting and inspection center will help residents navigate through a process that involves seven county departments.

Assistant County Manager – Bill Johnson – is now more commonly referred to as our "Permitting Czar". Will the "Czar" please stand? If you have a problem with permitting, call Bill!

All joking aside, permitting is a process that has a direct impact on our economic growth. Customers deserve efficient service. We are providing it... while ensuring our communities are safe and sustainable. Permitting is a promise kept.

Aging

I have also kept my promise to support our seniors. Last month, I was here at the Miami-Dade County Auditorium for a very different reason, but one just as important. I proudly kicked-off "The Mayor's Initiative on Aging: To Life."

Hundreds of seniors filled the seats you are sitting in right now, thirsting for information on the new Medicare prescription drug benefits. My office... along with the county's Consortium for a Healthier Miami-Dade and the Alliance for Aging... helped provide this vital information.

The event was just the first in a series of promotional, educational and fitness programs designed specifically for our county's seniors.

We are also in the process of hiring a Senior Advocate charged with coordinating and enhancing the county's senior services. I want this person to possess a passion for our community's oldest residents. I want this person to identify, protect and defend the programs that serve those who have spent a lifetime contributing to our economic prosperity.

As many of you know, I lost my father last year and my mother is struggling with her health. These aging initiatives are very personal for me. I have visited dozens of senior centers... and looked into the eyes of mother's and father's just like my own. We have a moral obligation to care for those who cared for us. Whatever I can do to improve the lives of our seniors, I will.

Mental Health

Like our seniors... the mentally ill are finally getting the attention they deserve. I am proud to say that the Mayor's Mental Health Task Force has brought together key decision-makers who can positively impact the lives of the mentally ill.

Task force co-chairs Judge Steven Leifman, Sylvia Quintana and Jack Lowell form the nexus of this effort... bringing together the local... state and private sectors. Let's recognize them.

Because of their work... 9-1-1 operators, police and correctional officers are receiving training to deal with the mentally ill. Funding has been secured and a site picked for a facility to treat defendants awaiting trial for non-violent offenses.

By the end of the year, I am confident the task force will boast many more accomplishments and successfully implement all of the recommendations outlined in a 2005 Miami-Dade County Grand Jury Report. It is a report that referred to our jails as the new mental institutions. That is unacceptable!

Despite my many years in law enforcement, it wasn't until recently that I saw firsthand the mentally ill housed at our county jail. What I saw weren't hardened criminals... but individuals suffering from illness – individuals whose cries for help were manifested in criminal acts. We must intervene in the lives of the mentally ill before they reach our criminal justice system. This is a cause without a powerful constituency... but it demands our attention nonetheless.

UDB

Despite the fact that we are looking out for our mentally ill... serving our seniors... and making improvements in all areas of county government... our quality of life is at risk.

I am not talking about the depletion of the ozone layer... or the threat of oil drilling off our shores. My concern is much more basic. It is not happening above the clouds... or miles off our coast. It could happen in our own backyard. I am talking about moving the Urban Development Boundary. It is and will continue to be the biggest challenge this community faces.

Critical decisions are about to be made about our future growth. Our local and state experts have made it clear where they stand.

The wrong decisions could leave us all with more traffic congestion, reduced services, and unaffordable homes.

The right ones will necessitate infill housing and protect our wildlife, water supply, agricultural industry, and our precious Everglades.

As one local Pinecrest resident – who is here today -- so eloquently wrote, “Let’s give Mother Nature a break so we can go visit her while she still lives here.” Alan Nowell... the author of those words... please stand up. You are just one of the hundreds of people who have spoken out... and joined the fight to “Hold the Line”. On this day... you are surrounded by supporters... and I count myself among them.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear. The fight to “Hold the Line” is here to stay. We must remain forever vigilant if we are to protect our precious resources. We must never let our guard down and become complacent. We must make the appropriate decisions at the appropriate times, because the push to move the line will not end.

Thank you to all of you who continue to fight the good fight... the right fight – a battle our children... and our children’s children will admire and respect us for.

I ask the commission to join me in “Holding the Line” and holding on to our quality of life.

NEW PRIORITIES

Wireless

While we reflect on promises kept and progress made, we must also focus on new priorities.

I believe wireless technology – on a grand scale – will make Miami-Dade County a premier place to live, work and visit. Over the next two years, we will seek to offer low-cost, high-speed internet access to all. We will work with the private sector to create a Miami-Dade County with its own wireless network.

The goal is to erase what is known as the “digital divide” – and make information available to anyone, anywhere in the County. Computer technology and internet access should not be for the privileged few, but for the masses.

With this wireless network... families without the means to buy a computer or access the internet will have new and affordable options. We can attract businesses that require advanced technology. And residents who already use wireless services will enjoy a new level of convenience and cost-savings.

This wireless network will save the County alone an estimated \$25 million over five years. Savings to residents will be millions more.

We must move boldly and swiftly with this wireless initiative. If we do not start now, the world will leave us behind.

Workforce

We are doing a lot of catching up when it comes to creating a viable workforce.

Miami-Dade County has been blessed with record low unemployment. Even so, an estimated 48,000 people in our community are out of work. There is a mechanism already in place to teach people skills, get them jobs and, ultimately, give them a sense of self-worth. It is called the South Florida Workforce. The State of Florida believes it is being underutilized. I agree.

In collaboration with the state, South Florida Workforce, the County Manager's Office and the County Attorney's Office, we are restructuring – creating a new business plan that conforms to state and federal requirements... and makes better use of the millions of dollars that flow into our county to foster regional economic growth.

The goal is to make the South Florida Workforce truly work for job seekers... as well as prospective employers. We cannot afford to waste one cent of the \$60 million dollars available. Our community's viability and sustainability depend on it. When you look at it, this is one of the best investments we will ever make because it is a direct investment in our own people.

Uninsured

As we seek to provide skills and jobs to the unemployed, we must also consider another segment of our society – the “working” poor.

Miami-Dade County, thanks to a community filled with proud, dedicated and hard-working people, is growing and thriving. But for 600,000 people... something is missing – something that no person should be without – primary, preventative health care.

It is a sad fact that more than a quarter of our residents – are uninsured. It is putting our public health system in financial jeopardy. The cost of care simply exceeds the amount of public support. But, the answer to solving this problem may be closer than we think.

In a small area of south Miami-Dade County... an experiment is underway. A health plan with flexible benefits is about to be offered to those who cannot afford traditional health insurance and are ineligible for Medicare and Medicaid.

The “Flex Plan” program provides enrollees a network of community doctors. It offers convenience for families who may otherwise have to travel miles to receive emergency care. This is a chance for our working poor to get medical care – at a reasonable price – before they face a health crisis.

I want to thank Jackson Health Systems for reaching out to the business community to make this affordable and realistic plan possible.

There is hope that this experiment can succeed... expand... and one day be a model for the nation.

Affordable Housing

The prosperity equation involves not only affordable healthcare, but affordable housing. The average home in our county costs \$369,000 – nearly eight times the average household income. It is a staggering statistic that is impacting our blue and white collar workers – like teachers and service

employees – who form the core of this community. It is also deterring those who seek to make Miami-Dade County their home.

The solution to our affordable housing problem is not simple, but one tool is within our reach. I have asked the County Manager to compile a list of county-owned land and land we can buy – identifying areas in every district. This is land which can be used to woo developers and construct affordable housing. Let's face it, land is the county's most valuable and available tool to tackle the affordable housing crisis.

As with permitting, we are putting together a working group comprised of county staff and industry experts. This working group will take a comprehensive look, not only at available and acquirable land, but other promising ideas like inclusionary zoning.

The American dream should be available to every deserving resident of Miami-Dade County. That includes the opportunity of home ownership.

Government Fitness

As we seek to tackle long-standing problems like affordable housing, the uninsured, and joblessness... we must also set short-term goals. All department directors in Miami-Dade County have been challenged to identify what can be accomplished in their departments within the year. Not five or 10 years from now, but by the end of this year.

I am talking about tangible results – what can be implemented, enacted, completed and achieved; not proposed, studied, analyzed and considered.

A new focus is also on several departments which have historically been overlooked and under-funded, like our Water & Sewer and Corrections Departments. They demand our attention!

We are also strengthening already strong ties with our public school system. By pooling our needs and resources, in areas like fuel purchasing and emergency response, we can better leverage our tax dollars.

We owe it to our taxpayers to show them what we are doing today and everyday... and exactly how their hard-earned money is being spent.

Full Disclosure

As we seek to hold our management professionals accountable, we, as elected officials, must also submit ourselves to greater scrutiny.

My office is preparing a proposed ordinance to strengthen our current financial disclosure requirements.

In simple terms, elected and high-level county officials need to spell out how their outside business relationships could potentially or perceivably conflict or compromise their decisions.

These relationships must be disclosed before any action is taken on any item. I am also calling for the random auditing of disclosure statements, and providing this information on-line so that it is easily accessible to the public.

We all know that even a perceived conflict of interest becomes a conflict of interest when the details of our business relationships are not laid out for all to see.

We need to demonstrate that we hold office to provide excellence in government and for no other reason. Our constituents are entitled to our unconditional willingness to submit our financial affairs to public scrutiny.

It is my hope that this legislation will serve as a model for openness in government throughout Miami-Dade County and beyond.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on the State of our County, I remind myself of how fortunate we are to live in the greatest country in the world – in a state of sub-tropical splendor – where the sea meets our shores and the sun sheds its warmth upon all of us – without regard to our particular lot in life or the circumstance of our existence.

With these blessings in mind, I am gratified to report to all of you that Miami-Dade County is flourishing and on solid economic footing. We are poised to continue leading the State of Florida as a prosperous, progressive, and all-inclusive stronghold of ideals – ideals such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we hold so dear.

The progress, promises kept and new priorities I have outlined are just the beginning. It is important to remember, these are not just my accomplishments, but the collective accomplishments of our elected officials, county manager and county staff. Let's (again) recognize our elected officials. Thank you for your service and countless contributions. And our County Manager. George, you are hardworking, dedicated, and above all, a decent and principled administrator.

And finally, to the people of Miami-Dade County, I promise to continue to listen and seek input from you, and meet with constituents at my satellite offices or wherever they may find.

I will continue to take measured steps to improve and streamline government.

I will continue to reject pie-in-the-sky proposals offered only to gain media attention, but without regard for their ultimate implementation and realization.

I will continue to make decisions that I believe are in the best interest of all the people, no matter how politically unpopular they may be.

Most importantly, I will remain ever-mindful that I serve because of you – the people.

Thank you and God Bless!